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ABSTRACT

This paper is designed to aid practitioners (school administrators) in encouraging the development of community involvement. The pros and cons of community involvement, as well as guidelines for its implementation, are outlined. The policy of the board of education should encourage citizen participation and should sanction advisory committees. Adequate funding should be supplied by the school district. (DS)

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The Pennsylvania Executive Academy

Monograph Series

No. 1

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

2

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CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	i
Pros and Cons	1
Community Perceptions	3
Necessity for Board Approval	5
Specific Guidelines	5
Financial Support	6
Conclusion	7
BIBLIOGRAPHY	8

INTRODUCTION

Community involvement is, and will continue to be, of paramount importance to school districts. State and federal authorities are demanding community involvement as a requisite to funding or approval of programs, and communities (parents, students, teachers, etc.) themselves are demanding a voice in the education of their children. Schools' financial problems and the general economic crunch are causing communities to take a closer look at their schools in terms of the cost of educational programs, staff use, facilities and instructional material costs. Finally, better informed citizens are concerned and want to be involved because they feel they can contribute to the overall success of the school.

This, the first in a series of monographs designed to help superintendents or management teams identify and assess a practical topic or problem, deals with community involvement. Is it a problem? What are its advantages and disadvantages? How do you involve the community successfully? What are the pros and cons of community involvement? These and other questions will be addressed in the following pages.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Pros and Cons

Why should the local board of education, the administration or the teachers be concerned about involving the community in the educational process? Why should the extra time be spent? Why listen to people without a background in education? The answers to these and similar questions are simple: It is just plain good educational procedure and excellent public relations to involve the consumers, both students and citizens, in the educational process. The community can provide valuable assistance in areas where educators lack background and experience. Examples of community expertise might be in the areas of school construction (engineers, architects and contractors) and school finance (accountants and business persons). Obviously, there are other areas of concern about which citizens' committees may well provide valuable information and expertise that can bring about a more functional program at reasonable cost.

Professional educators continually question the advantages of using the community, and they are frequently quick to point out some of the disadvantages. To be sure, there are disadvantages, just as any procedure has problems. However, the advantages in terms of information gained, help received, studies completed and community public relations far outweigh the disadvantages.

Here are some of the common disadvantages voiced by school people:

. Community involvement is a time-consuming endeavor.

. Community groups become unwieldy. They are difficult to control. In most cases, they lose interest and do not follow through on projects.

. It is costly to maintain community groups and get involvement from a cross-section of citizens.

. Community groups become "vested interest" groups and even attempt to become "super school boards."

. Most community persons are not interested in what happens at the school. Therefore, only the interested people get involved. Community advisory groups never include the people who should be concerned.

. Finding a proper time and adequate place to meet is a problem.

. Community groups usually have an "axe to grind" with a particular person or group in the school.

Whether the above-mentioned items are real or imaginary is of no consequence. If the board, the administration or the teachers even think they are problems, then they are real.

Obviously, there are some advantages to the use of community groups. The following list is offered to counter the disadvantages and to show that community groups can create a healthy, cooperative climate in the school district:

. More people in the community become informed about the school district's programs and plans.

. It is advantageous for school authorities to learn what the consumers (community) expect from the schools.

. When the community becomes involved in educational planning and serves in an advisory capacity, more teachers, counselors and administrators become involved and begin to think about community needs and desires with regard to curriculum.

. The use of community groups to conduct studies or to advise the administration and the board eliminates the pressure and backlash that often accompany the making of unilateral decisions.

. It allows teachers and administrators to meet citizens on a face-to-face basis and to discuss common problems. Also, it provides these groups with an opportunity to determine what individuals or groups have vested interests.

. The formation of community groups, if done wisely, draws the power structure of the community into the mainstream of school district thinking. It provides the school a way to air problems with the persons of the community so that the community can take steps to get things done.

- Community involvement, if carried out wisely, draws uninvolved citizens into the mainstream.
- Community involvement in its broadest sense provides an avenue of communication with the students, since they should be part of any community involvement committee.
- A well-chosen community group can be an excellent sounding board for community social problems.
- In a society characterized by increasing population and attendant frustrations, a functioning community involvement group will help humanize the education process.

Community Perceptions

Depending on the community, the establishment of committees and the involvement of community persons may be either a pleasurable experience or a traumatic experience. Naturally, the background and the experience of community persons are important to the success (or lack of success) of the community involvement experience. Size of the community (school district) is another concern that must be considered by administrators when they establish and involve persons in school district studies. Another important facet of the community's perception is the amount of community involvement that has taken place previously. Being honest with community individuals and groups is of prime importance when community involvement committees and procedures are established. If district officials are not candid on all matters, then the community may be recalcitrant, passively resistant, openly antagonistic or all of these. The type, plus the consistency, of community groups bears directly on the perceptions formed by individuals. Community involvement committees may be established on a school district level or on a school building level and be successful. However, it is extremely important that school officials know about a number of good management procedures that tend to insure success. The following tips may help school district persons

work effectively with community committees:

- Be wary of the size of committees. Do not allow a committee standing or ad hoc) to become too large and unwieldy.
- Attempt to be unbiased and fair in the placement of persons on a committee. In short, do not attempt to "stack" a committee.
- Set the ground rules with respect to authority, purpose and range of topics assigned to any committee. The local board of school directors has the ultimate legal authority for making decisions.
- Make meetings meaningful and pertinent. Provide an agenda prior to any meeting and adhere to it.
- Try to be open-minded and receptive to ideas from persons from the community. Do not try to impose your professional philosophy or views.
- Establish a procedure for the communication of results of meetings. Information and feedback should go to other committees, school district personnel and the community at large.
- Community involvement and enthusiasm are a direct result of experience. Make certain that the board will accept and institute committee ideas if the ideas are feasible and economically sound. If ideas are not going to be used, then school district officials (administrators and board members) have an obligation to explain why.
- Establish a method or procedure to give recognition to individuals and groups.

Obviously, the personality of those working with community groups will have a powerful impact on the eventual perceptions that the community derives. Therefore, it is significant that care be given in the choice of school district and community personnel who will serve on committees. This does not imply stacking, but rather placing people in terms of their strengths.

Committees may be permanent standing committees or ad hoc committees, depending on the task(s) to be performed. If a task can be accomplished in a relatively short period of time, it may then be wise to use the ad hoc approach. This approach may have a positive effect on community persons since they will feel that their involvement served a specific purpose.

Necessity for Board Approval

Before school district officials establish community involvement procedures or attempt to recruit persons from the community, it is essential that the board of education takes certain steps, beginning with initial approval. The following specific reasons tend to uphold the necessity for board approval of community involvement:

- A formal board policy on community involvement will legitimize the procedure and show the community that the board is concerned about and aware of community problems and ideas.
- By devising and approving a formal policy, the board serves notice on the staff and community regarding the type and extent of community involvement.
- By advertising its intent to adopt a formal community involvement policy, the board provides itself an opportunity to measure the pulse of its constituents.
- By developing and adopting a formal policy, the board can determine overall costs more accurately. Therefore, it can provide the budget necessary for community involvement to be successful.

Specific Guidelines

Within the framework of a formal school board policy on community involvement there should be specific policy guidelines. These guidelines may be developed by the administrative staff or a committee made up of administrators, teachers and board members. Whatever the procedure for developing policy guidelines, certain specifics are a must. Items listed below should be considered when guidelines are to be included in a formal policy. A board policy should reflect an honest philosophy of community involvement, and a specific statement of purpose is essential to a good board policy. Specific objectives of a board policy on community involvement should be identified and written in some form of measurable outcomes. Further specific information that should be included in a formal policy includes:

. An overall operational plan.

. The responsibilities of groups and individuals.

. The composition of committees.

. An organizational chart.

. A listing of general and specific functions of community involvement committees.

. A plan (strategy) to insure that communication will take place.

. A general timetable or work schedule.

Financial Support

What is one basic concern of districts in today's economy? MONEY! Obviously, a concerted effort at getting the community involved will cost some money. However, the returns in terms of community relations, improved programs, short-range studies, increased assistance and broader communications are well worth the expenditure of funds.

What are some costs that may be anticipated as a result of instituting a community involvement policy? First, there will be the costs of printing and mailing information, reports and studies. Some other costs will be for refreshments at meetings, and there will be costs related to tasks (need assessment instruments, consultants). Other costs may involve such tasks as typing (part-time secretarial help) and perhaps some expenses for travel. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, you will possibly incur the additional expenses of paying for substitute teachers for meetings held during the school day. If meetings are held after school hours, it may be necessary to pay overtime as a result of union contracts. Regardless, the board should attempt to anticipate costs in order to prevent a breakdown in community involvement because of a lack of funds.

Conclusion

This monograph is an attempt to provide pertinent information on a current educational topic (community involvement). The text attempts to cover only those areas about which school district persons normally raise questions. The information is designed to aid the practitioner in the field and to provide some answers. This paper not only attempts to give answers to questions but attempts to offer a step-by-step approach to developing and implementing a community involvement procedure. One can only hope that, to this end, the monograph has been at least a partial success.

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